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Memory Test: A History of U.S. Citizenship Education and Examination

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Background/Context: While much has been written about the history of immigration and naturalization in the United States, few scholars have looked at the history of citizenship education and testing. The small body of literature on the subject has primarily focused on World War I-era Americanization efforts and, as such, has excluded later periods. Further, while it has looked at citizenship education programs, it has usually done so without considering the context of the high stakes exam that immigrants must pass in order to become citizens.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: Each year, tens of thousands of would-be American citizens set out to conquer the U.S. citizenship test. To do so, they must be prepared to answer 10 fact-oriented questions about American government, history, and geography selected by a naturalization examiner from a master list of 100. A score of six correct answers earns citizenship. Consequently, aspiring citizens memorize the number of Amendments to the Constitution, the branches of government, the names of three of the original American colonies, and the location of the Statue of Liberty. Most immigrants pass. This article seeks to understand the roots of the memory test that currently serves as America's gauge of fitness for citizenship. In looking back over 100 years of history, it seeks to explore how a once highly pluralistic approach to education and an anxiety-producing system of testing conducted by naturalization courts became what we know today. By asking how we got here, it also implicitly asks whether we want to maintain this status quo or seek out change.

Research Design: In analyzing the history of U.S. citizenship education and examination in the 20th and early 21st centuries, this study utilizes three primary groupings of sources. First, it incorporates the voices of leaders at the naturalization agency—the organization that administers the citizenship test—through personal communications, annual reports, and other agency publications. Second, it draws on primary sources from outside of the naturalization agency, including descriptions of state naturalization efforts, reports on the pur-

pose and practice of community Americanization programs, and evaluations of early- and mid-century naturalization agency work. Finally, it looks at the broader context within which the citizenship examination evolved, looking at the secondary literature on Americanization education by historians of education and historians of immigration, as well as at primary sources like presidential and Congressional records.

Conclusions/Recommendations: *This study finds that the history of citizenship preparation and testing over the course of a century, despite its fairly consistent procession towards the goals of standardization and efficiency, is not the story of an inevitable sequence of events. Policymakers recognized the pitfalls inherent in a highly centralized approach focusing on standards. Yet, in light of this, they were consistently willing to trade depth and variability for efficiency and certainty. The result has been a fair, economical, and increasingly irrelevant program for making immigrants citizens.*

What makes an American? Responses can be as diverse as the nation itself, but there is also an unexpected and highly practical answer: three-by-five index cards.

For decades, would-be citizens have armed themselves with at-home study guides, cramming to learn facts about nineteenth-century wars, the names of the original colonies, and the number of amendments to the Constitution in preparation for a 10-question interview with an immigration officer. With six correct answers proving fitness for citizenship, the test inspires anxiety in only those with poor memories. Further, although the exam has recently undergone a redesign effort, petitioners for citizenship can still count on those questions coming from an approved list of 100 items that includes questions like, "Why does the flag have 13 stripes?" and "Who was the first president?" A set of flashcards is available on the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website.

Because of the factual orientation of the test, citizenship courses focus heavily on test preparation. As one historian writes, "official instruction in citizenship now plays almost no role in furthering naturalization among immigrants" (Schneider, 2001, p. 65). Why, one might wonder, has the U.S. government favored standardized testing over education for would-be citizens? This is even more puzzling when one takes into account the fact that, only a century ago, public schools, community groups, and charitable organizations offered a range of citizenship-preparation courses as pluralistic as the immigrants they served.

Nevertheless, citizenship programs were not without problems. Classes were optional and often sparsely attended, and they varied in availability, duration, and curricular emphasis. Further, they were often frustratingly disconnected from the examination process, failing to prepare immigrants for hearings before naturalization courts. Naturalization judges exercised the right to examine immigrants' knowledge of civics and the

English language in any way they saw fit, and, not surprisingly, large numbers of immigrants failed early tests (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1916, p. 10). With so many immigrants failing and re-applying, or failing and then staying without seeking citizenship, it was a costly and highly inefficient system (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1917, p. 5; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1916, p. 11).

In light of this, Congress created the Bureau of Naturalization, known later as the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and currently as United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Over the course of a century of work, the naturalization agency very effectively addressed some of the problems of inefficiency and unfairness that it was created to solve, developing systematic coherence and clear standards of knowledge. However, in addressing those problems, the agency took over most of the work of the courts in examining would-be citizens and indirectly reduced the influence of education programs, which was not without consequence.

In working to establish a more predictable and systematic way of testing would-be citizens, the agency reduced both backlogs and anxiety, but also replaced a once challenging process with a routine one. In establishing clear standards of knowledge for the high-stakes test, it reduced uncertainty and variability, but in so doing, tacitly promoted memorization over education. In some ways, the citizenship test we have today is a significant improvement over its predecessors; in other ways, it reflects a long series of questionable choices.

This article focuses on the development of the citizenship test from early twentieth-century efforts to create a more systematic method of preparing and testing would-be citizens, through the creation of a formal set of 100 test questions in 1986, to the most recent revision of the test, which debuted in 2008. While this piece ambitiously tackles an entire century, it focuses particularly on periods of significant activity either on the part of the naturalization agency—the organization ultimately responsible for the test—or on the part of Congress in crafting immigration policy. As part of a wider historiography on immigration policy, this is equally a story about the crafting of education reform, raising questions about local and national control, standards and testing, and the nature of institutional decision making.

THE IMMIGRATION CRISIS

The Naturalization Acts of 1802 established the fundamentals of the naturalization process, including a waiting period of five years of residency,

a declaration of intention, an oath of allegiance to the United States and the Constitution, and the testimony of witnesses attesting to the character of immigrants petitioning for naturalization (Schneider, 2001, p. 52). For roughly 100 years, naturalization, like many other government processes, was administered on the local level with little federal oversight. The process was handled in local courts, and judges were the ultimate arbiters. Some judges, appointees of political machines, "transformed hundreds of petitioners into newly minted Americans in a single day" (Schneider, 2001, p. 54). Others, in interpreting the Naturalization Acts, took it upon themselves to ask potential citizens civics questions to test their knowledge of the government, assuming that anyone swearing an oath to support the Constitution needed to understand it (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1916, p. 10).

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the thousands of naturalization courts in the U.S. were marked by backlogs and delays and had widely varying standards in what they required from petitioners for citizenship (Thompson, 1920, p. 337; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1925, p. 21). This would have been problem enough had it not been coupled with a massive increase in immigration. Between 1891 and 1900, 3,687,564 immigrants came to the U.S. In the next decade, that number more than doubled, skyrocketing to 8,795,386. For some Americans and their representatives in Washington, the sheer number of new immigrants was less problematic than the locations from which they came. Whereas, a generation earlier, most immigrants had come from Germany, Ireland, and England, the new wave of immigration brought nearly 6 million Hungarians, Italians, and Russian Jews to the United States. How, many wondered, were these people going to be made into citizens and Americans?

These increased rates of immigration, particularly from Eastern and Southern Europe, raised concerns among much of the voting public as well as among elected representatives. "The fear that new voters were not ready for the duties of American citizenship had always accompanied the debate about naturalization," writes historian Dorothee Schneider, "but it was not until the early twentieth century that lasting reform on the Federal level was attempted to amend the perceived problems" (2001, p. 55). The first such effort was Congress's passage of the Naturalization Act of 1906, establishing the federal Bureau of Naturalization.¹ In creating the Bureau, Congress aimed to respond to the crisis resulting from the spike in immigration and the perceived threat to employment, safety, and culture that it posed. Of particular concern was the incomplete and unsystematic education of would-be citizens as well as the inefficiency of naturalization courts in processing them.

Although it struck some as odd that the Bureau of Naturalization, rather than the Bureau of Education, was attempting to establish jurisdiction over the conduct and character of citizenship preparation and testing, there was a feeling that immigrant education was a federal, rather than a state, problem. Immigrants generally established homes within a few states and were initiated into American life at the expense of those states (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, p. 53). Thus, some argued, while those few states and communities carried out the educational program, overseeing and supporting that work was a federal matter (Wheaton, 1920, p. 570; Thompson, 1920, pp. 21-22). In a number of cases, immigrants themselves petitioned the U.S. Bureau of Education for facilities in which to conduct evening school classes in English and civics and funds to hire instructors to teach those classes (Wheaton, 1920, p. 573).

The creation of the Bureau of Naturalization did not remake the naturalization process. In fact, because of its limited funds, all the new agency was able to do in its first years was “provide leadership in the form of advice and organizational facilities” (O’Brien, 1961, p. 161). Courts still did most of the work and locally run private and public education programs still did what they could to assist immigrants in adjusting to their new home (Higham, 1963, p. 236). The agency’s charge was to bring a systemic sense of order to this process by developing standards of civic knowledge and organizing the naturalization process for greater efficiency. Over the next few decades, they would pursue these goals determinedly.

THE SEARCH FOR ORDER

The Bureau of Naturalization had its work cut out for it in addressing problems of inefficiency and inconsistency in the naturalization process. In 1916, 108,000 applicants petitioned for citizenship in 2,345 clerks’ offices in naturalization courts, and, of those courts, 453, or nearly 20%, were labeled “habitually delinquent” in their work (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1916, p.11). Further, while naturalization judges were often quite thorough in their examinations of basic knowledge of English and civics, there remained no standard of practice. One consequence of this was the continued potential for corruption. Increasingly problematic, however, was the fact that rejecting large numbers of immigrant petitioners was resulting in long backlogs of immigrants whose applications were denied but flagged for continuance, meaning that they were deemed unfit for citizenship but given a second chance to prove themselves in court. In 1917, the courts denied 31,210 petitions for naturalization, marking them for continuance. Of those

continuances, 9,151 were cited as being due to ignorance of the responsibilities of American citizenship or ignorance of institutions of government (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1917, p. 10). A year later, another 10,000 petitioners were issued continuances for ignorance of citizenship and government (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1918, p. 5).

In his 1916 report, the Commissioner of Naturalization had deemed it “wholly illogical” to conclude that knowledge of the Constitution and government institutions, “however intimate and accurate,” conveyed an assurance “that the possessor thereof sees through it those basic principles which exist in practical life and loves them” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1917, p. 9). Nevertheless, the agency had been charged with assisting immigrants in passing interviews with naturalization judges, who still examined immigrants on their knowledge of facts about American civics and the Constitution.

For their part, citizenship preparation programs—primarily night schools—were characterized by poor attendance and curricular inconsistency. “Few immigrants over the compulsory-attendance age are found in any school,” wrote Boston Superintendent of Public Schools Frank V. Thompson in 1920. Courses were offered by a wide range of groups: local schools, citizens’ organizations like the YMCA and North American Civic League for Immigrants, patriotic groups like the Daughters of the American Revolution and the American Legion, and factories like the Ford Manufacturing Company (Hartmann, 1948, pp. 39-63; Butts, 1978, p. 236). However, according to a study by Charles H. Paull (1918), citizenship education, despite the wide range of courses offered, was failing to reach the majority of immigrants.

The larger problem in citizenship education, some seemed to think, was curricular inconsistency. In classes that immigrants did attend, “few established and well-approved standards existed, and...public agencies of various kinds were endeavoring to treat the problem each in its own way” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1916). Some programs focused on the formal structure of government, while others focused on forming a bridge between ethnic and American culture (Butts, 1980, p.64). Yet, much of the work, according to a Carnegie Commission Study, was “emotional,” “unsystematic,” and “coercive” (Thompson, 1920, pp. 239-261). A study of the Cleveland public schools seconded this criticism, noting that the classes were “making a most meager contribution” due to “progressively decreasing...enrollment” and a “total lack of unified plan” (Miller, 1916, pp. 89-91). H. H. Wheaton of the Bureau of Education warned of the consequences of not addressing the “chaos existing in immigrant education” (1920, p. 569).

Directly educating immigrants was still out of the purview of the agency, but it did aim to bring a sense of order to the system. According to the 1916 *Report of the Commissioner of Naturalization*, the agency agreed, “in response to the numerous calls upon it,” to create an outline course in citizenship, focusing primarily on the framework of state and local government (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1916, p. 39). Consequently, while the Commissioner of the agency wrote that the Bureau had at no time “failed to point out to all that it does not assume the role of educator,” he did see it as a force for reform of the education process, particularly in what it could accomplish by establishing a standard (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1916, p. 30). Developing a clear standard would establish minimum competency in a network of citizenship education programs that consistently lacked funding and qualified teachers (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1920, p. 113). Further, it would be significantly more efficient in saving “the time of clerks of the courts” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1916, p. 11).

Already there was a strong precedent in American education for establishing uniform tests. As early as the nineteenth century, Horace Mann had led the state of Massachusetts away from oral testing and towards standardized and ostensibly objective written tests that were “easier to administer and offered a streamlined means of classifying growing numbers of students” (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1992, p. 107). Perhaps even more influential was the creation of the College Entrance Examination Board in 1900. The College Board, like the Bureau of Naturalization, did not assume the responsibility of directly educating high school students. It did, however, establish uniform standards for college admission. The College Board “published syllabi in different subjects; teachers taught the syllabus prepared for their subject, and students were examined on whether they had mastered it” (Ravitch, 2002).

In addition to bringing a sense of order to the work done in public schools, the agency also aimed to encourage attendance. In May 1918, shortly before the end of the First World War, it took its first step towards this aim after Congress authorized the Bureau of Naturalization to send the names of candidates for citizenship to the public schools. Congress also authorized the distribution of free textbooks to adults attending evening classes—textbooks which were intended to determine the curricula of the courses taught.² *The Student’s Textbook and Teacher’s Manual* were prepared with the assistance of the Bureau, and the result was a set of books pronounced by “one of the leading authorities” as “a thousand times better” than any previously available” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1918, p. 43).

By other accounts, however, the textbooks were less successful, representing an overwhelming collection of facts and figures rather than anything regarding the development of citizenship (Thompson, 1920, p. 347). They recapitulated much of the traditional patriotic history of nineteenth-century works and of textbooks created by groups like the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the American Bar Association (Tyack, 2003, p. 53). Further, the early federal textbooks were written in “complicated and advanced language,” marked by errors, and full of information irrelevant to citizenship—the number of fish and fish eggs produced in U.S. hatcheries, for example—making the texts dependent on teachers for selecting what might be useful (Thompson, 1920, p. 348).

Despite the ineffectiveness of the federal textbook, agency coordination with the public schools was producing desired outcomes. Many citizenship programs were instructing immigrants in the specific “standards of citizenship set up by the requirements of the naturalization process,” and the agency-sponsored textbook was repeatedly revised to emphasize questions about civics and the Constitution traditionally asked in naturalization exams (Thompson, 1920, p. 17; see also U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1944). As a result of this increased articulation between examiners and education programs, continuances because of ignorance of government were, within a few years, down 25% to 7,587, and citizenship classes were expanding in enrollment. The Commissioner of Naturalization in 1919 emphasized the usefulness of public night school courses being taught with the aim of helping petitioners pass their high-stakes tests: “Petitioners who have been in attendance usually pass a good examination, and those who have not attended fail to get through” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1919, p. 87).

Yet, there was still no uniform knowledge standard. The only legal standard, other than attachment to the principles of the Constitution, required the petitioner to speak English and sign his or her own name. As a consequence, the agency noted, there remained “a wide diversity in the requirements” for passing court tests and equal variety in education programs (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1925, p. 21). “In point of fact,” wrote Raymond Moley, chairman of Cleveland’s Americanization Committee, “its standards are as various almost as the temperaments of the 62 examiners,” among whom he found “no uniformity of view” (Thompson, 1920, p. 337). A decade later, the Department of Labor would find that little progress had been made on this front (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1935, p. 55). Still, the agency would continue to determinedly pursue a standard.

SEEKING A STANDARD

By 1922, the Bureau of Naturalization had made significant strides towards one of its major goals—moving testing out of the courts for the sake of expediency. The agency's staff had more than doubled, and courts had agreed to accept as sufficient evidence of a petitioner's knowledge of government a certificate from a naturalization officer "showing that the petitioner had completed successfully a public-school course in citizenship training" (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1922, p. 16). The work of the Bureau of Naturalization as a facilitator was saving the time of the courts in hearing naturalization petitions. The result was that only 320 of 2,306 courts (less than 14%) were classified as habitually delinquent that year.

The Bureau continued to articulate a concern with encouraging enrollment in citizenship classes but began to focus more on "the work of advancing the standard of education among the applicants for citizenship" (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1922, p. 2). While it still lacked a uniform standard for questioning, the agency had already developed a textbook for use in citizenship preparation programs—a common curriculum on which examiners could draw in their questioning. In doing so, it seemed to have had two aims. First, the agency aimed to establish a clear standard of knowledge, both for the sake of efficiency and for the sake of fairness. Just as important, it aimed to more clearly define the relationship between citizenship classes and examination as a means of encouraging immigrants to enroll in courses (Hartmann, 1948, pp. 253-266).

In 1921, Congress passed the Emergency Quota Act, the first quota law for restricting immigration. The act limited entrance for specific nationalities to 3% of their current population in the U.S. and used the 1910 census for the purposes of calculating population. Three years later, the act was amended by the Immigration Act of 1924, which limited nationalities to 2% of their 1890 population. Immigration was cut to a trickle, much to the satisfaction of restrictionists. In the previous decade, 1911-1920, nearly 6 million immigrants had come to the U.S. In the following decade, roughly one tenth of that figure would come.³ Americanization faded from the front-page news.⁴

Many of the agency's goals, however, were not tied to the flow of immigrants. In 1926, the agency succeeded in persuading Congress to alter naturalization law, allowing for preliminary hearings conducted by naturalization examiners in which they could interview candidates and then make a recommendation to the court. The examiners' recommendations were not binding, and the courts could choose to hold their own exami-

nations if desired. Yet, in securing this foothold, the agency had won a piece of prized territory for itself, even as the context that had made its work necessary continued to change significantly. By 1931, the agency was recommending that every alien have “knowledge of the institutions of the Government to the satisfaction of the naturalization examiner, equal to that taught in the public schools to children up to the age of 14 years” (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Naturalization, 1931, p. 13). The choice of that age made sense in the 1930s when universal high school enrollment was still decades away; further, it was in keeping with the content of the agency-sponsored textbook. However, because standardized testing was still relatively new, there was no established methodology for designing standardized testing or judging whether test scores accurately reflected learning (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1992, p. 111).

By the 1930s, the textbook had gone through a number of editions, each being heralded as a vast improvement in clarity and focus, resulting in “increased interest” reflected by a growing demand for copies. Whereas, once, “no amount of study” by immigrants could “win for them the diplomas which [would] exempt them at the final hearing from the dreaded examination in open court” (Thompson, 1920, p. 336), this was changing as naturalization examiners continued doing work previously reserved for judges. This expanding jurisdiction allowed the agency to “develop an educational standard for admission to citizenship that would command universal recognition and respect” (Thompson, 1920, p. 337). Another factor was at play, however, in that the agency wanted a test that immigrants could pass. Because the agency continued to place great emphasis on efficiency, any standard would need to move immigrants through the system as swiftly as possible without creating the sorts of backlogs and delays that the naturalization agency had been charged with reducing.

A standard was developing, but it was weaker than some had hoped for. In 1934, the Commissioner of the agency, newly renamed the Immigration and Naturalization Service, reported that “mere memory tests” were being prescribed in lieu of reasoning exams. Consequently, the Commissioner recommended that naturalization examiners adjust “from stress upon memory tests of facts to emphasis upon knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of the principles of government” (U.S. Department of Labor, 1935, pp. 54-55). However, the agency had not pursued a capacity-building strategy—developing teachers, for instance—that would make this possible. Further, there still remained the pressing concern of “utter lack of uniformity” in testing “strikingly illustrated by the fact that, of 848 questions asked applicants, not one was asked by all

54 of the examiners" (U.S. Department of Labor, 1935, p. 55). The primary objective of the agency, thus, remained "a greater approximation of the constitutional requirement of a uniform rule of naturalization...especially upon the subject of educational standards for naturalization and greater efficiency in immigration and naturalization work" (U.S. Department of Labor, 1935, p. 56).

Getting the testing done in a timely manner, creating questions that petitioners could pass, and making the test the same for everyone were the primary concerns of the agency in the 1930s. The constraints imposed by these concerns, however, would make the test difficult to endow with any real meaning beyond that of a memory test, despite the concerns of agency leaders. Not surprisingly, citizenship classes began to change.

In 1920, classes could be characterized by one of two approaches—those that provided "training in a few facts concerning the government and Constitution designed especially for men filing petitions for naturalization" and those that provided "general instruction in civic and social responsibility which is often given in connection with lessons in English" (Thompson, 1920, p. 351). In its quest for efficiency and fairness, the agency promoted the former at the expense of the latter. As testing became more routine, one can imagine that it became less acceptable for classes to veer from the standards set by INS examiners and the citizenship textbook. Not surprisingly, most citizenship education began to focus on "teaching by the book, lecturing, note taking, question-and-answer recitation, memorizing, essay writing, and examination passing" (Butts, 1980, p. 66). Activities like "venturing out into the community" did exist, but became less common (Butts, 1980, p. 67).

Yet who was going to complain? Immigrants certainly were not. They wanted to pass the test. And, as long as they were going to remain in the country, leaders at the naturalization agency and in Congress wanted petitioners for naturalization to pass as well. The courts were not going to complain. The naturalization agency had dramatically eased the burden of naturalization cases that had overwhelmed the courts for decades. Congress was satisfied. In addition to wanting immigrants to pursue citizenship rather than remain as resident aliens, Congress saw an agency doing exactly what it had been created to do—increasing the efficiency and standardization of the naturalization process (Bernard, 1936, pp. 943-953). The agency itself was certainly not about to make arguments that would decrease its importance and result in staff cuts. Further, as the INS's *Introduction to Citizenship Education Guide* noted: "God forbid that we should ever place needless formalities or raise artificial barriers before men who love our way of life and seek to share it fully!" (U.S. Department

of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS], 1943, p. 4).

Those who did complain that naturalization examiners were “basing their tests of fitness for citizenship upon primitive memory tests” were overmatched. The “immediate thing” that citizenship preparation began to provide was

a program aimed altogether at naturalization...[including] a question-and-answer exercise about the Constitution, about the number of senators and the length of term of representatives more than almost anything else—even though the words...are meaningless to [immigrants] and they literally do not know what they are talking about. (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1943, p. 25)

Consequently, gone by 1950 were a number of alternative citizenship preparation models that had prospered in the first decades of the century. “Memory testing” had become dominant, replacing programs like that run by A.W. Dunn, which emphasized approaches such as connecting citizenship education to the everyday lives of immigrants. Dunn, author of *Community Civics*, designed his program to deal “largely with the functions rather than the forms of government, and with the local community rather than the national government” (Thompson, 1920, p. 329). However, such a vision did not square with emerging national standards based on factual, easily testable, knowledge. Other programs on the wane included those providing practical civic education like practice in voting, discussion of public questions, mock trials, and miniature city councils. Similarly in decline were whole-person education programs like Boston’s Day School for Immigrants. Instituted in 1916 and originally designed for those with nighttime employment, the program became focused on serving immigrant mothers during the day and providing kindergarten education to their children (Thompson, 1920, pp. 68-69).

CONSTANCY IN CHANGING TIMES

In 1950, the Internal Security Act strengthened the requirements for naturalization by making the ability to read, write, and speak English a prerequisite. The act, designed, according to Congressman Pat McCarran, to “bring our immigration system into line with the realities of Communist tactics,” also formally added knowledge of American history to the previous requirements for knowledge of government and of the U.S. Constitution (Divine, 1957, pp. 161-162). To questions such as, “Who may be elected a Congressman?” and “How many states are there in the

United States?” were added sections in citizenship preparation guides that listed past American presidents, facts about the flag, and the names of the 13 original colonies (Thompson, 1920, pp. 338-339; U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1952, pp. 48-67). The changes were not intended to be onerous for naturalization candidates (DeSipio & de la Garza, 1998, p. 72).

Two years after the passage of the Internal Security Act, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. The McCarran-Walter Act, as it was known, abolished many of the harshest restrictions on immigration, though it retained the quota system as well as the policy of limiting the number of immigrants from each country in determining the 155,000 quota-immigrants per year (Ngai, 2004, p. 237). McCarran-Walter, crafted during the height of the Cold War, also allowed the deportation of immigrants engaged in subversive activities, citizens or otherwise, and provided for the barring of suspected subversives from entering. Unlike the Internal Security Act, McCarran-Walter would have little impact on the INS, despite its significant implications for immigration, because it did not demand anything new of the agency.

McCarran-Walter was vetoed by President Truman, who viewed it as reactionary and isolationist and lamented the “slur on the patriotism, the capacity, and the decency of a large part of our citizenry” that it represented (Truman, 1956, p. 441-447). In his support for the legislation, Senator Pat McCarran stated:

I believe that this nation is the last hope of Western civilization and if this oasis of the world shall be overrun, perverted, contaminated or destroyed, then the last flickering light of humanity will be extinguished. I take no issue with those who would praise the contributions which have been made to our society by people of many races, of varied creeds and colors...However, we have in the United States today hard-core, indigestible blocs which have not become integrated into the American way of life, but which, on the contrary are its deadly enemies. (McCarran, Cong. Rec., 1953, p. 1518)

McCarran and Francis Walter, the nativist cosponsor of the bill, were not alone in their sentiments, and the bill, which stated a concern for “similarity of cultural background” (Divine, 1957, p. 167), had enough support to override Truman’s veto.

Given these concerns about communists and “indigestible” immigrants, one might expect that the INS would have been engaged in reevaluation of its examination program. However, while McCarran-

Walter asked the INS to change its quota policies, it made no demands on its testing program. Consequently, rather than adapting the questions asked by naturalization examiners to coincide with the standards implicit in McCarran-Walter, the INS focused on continuing the work it was doing, noting that the McCarran-Walter Act “continued to charge [the] agency with the responsibility of serving educational programs for the foreign born” through activities like the printing and distribution of textbooks, sending the names of adult candidates for naturalization to the public schools, and cooperating with state and national organizations (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1953a, p. 68).

Despite its efforts, the INS continued to struggle to encourage attendance in citizenship classes. Further, efforts to attract immigrants to courses by promising to prepare them for examination were severely restricting the nature of citizenship preparation. Less than a decade earlier, the INS had written that “the heart of citizenship education is the actual work done in classes” (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1943, p. 24). Yet, the work being done in classes was increasingly limited. According to the agency, it was difficult enough to teach immigrants “even the very least they [had] to know to ‘get by’ a nationalization examination” much less “to build a deep understanding of American democracy, to foster undying loyalty to it, and to produce the kind of citizens who will be an asset in its operation” (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1943, p. 24).

By the 1950s, the agency had realized its effort to move naturalization examining out of the courts, with most judges simply following the recommendation of the naturalization interviewer (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1953b, p. 11). Further, whereas judges had once operated as free agents in their questioning, INS examiners had been asked to confine their questioning to those items covered by the *Federal Textbook on Citizenship*, which included in it fill-in questions like: “We elect a President every ____ years,” and “The Monroe Doctrine says that European nations must not ____ in the Americas” (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1961, pp. 4, 29). Consequently, while the system was less fear inspiring, it provided a weaker incentive for enrolling in anything other than a test-centered course. Many immigrants simply chose to study at home.

Not surprisingly, classes began to follow a “pattern of ‘hammering in’ or ‘plastering on’ a few facts to be recited before the naturalization examiner,” reducing citizenship preparation to “a kind of pseudo-learning in which the word is accepted without the meaning” (U.S. Department of Justice, INS & American Association of School Administrators, 1945, p. 9). Despite the fact that much of the work in these classes was “limited to a catechistical treatment of government...directed solely toward helping

the student answer a few questions of fact about government,” they were successful in attracting students. “Applicants for citizenship, motivated by the desire to pass the examination,” noted an INS report, “attended these classes” (U.S. Department of Justice, INS & American Association of School Administrators, 1945, pp. 14-15). Still, even if the test motivated attendance, it limited what could be accomplished in such classes. Though some more radical programs like the Citizenship Education Project at Columbia University Teachers College stressed skills of participation that it identified as “laboratory practices,” such programs had limited funding and support (Butts, 1980, p. 72).

Faced with these challenges, the INS did what it could to promote rigor in citizenship curricula and attendance in classes. INS officers stepped up their visits to classes in an effort to ensure quality and appropriateness, and the agency initiated a new school certificate program (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1953a, p. 70). The certificate program provided graduates of approved citizenship courses with documentation “showing the satisfactory completion by candidates for naturalization of courses of study upon the basic principles of the Constitution and Government and the History of the United States (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1953a, p. 70).” Certificates would be accepted by the INS in lieu of examination by an officer, a seemingly powerful inducement. The inducement, however, was frequently not enough to lure immigrants away from time with their families, particularly when federally provided materials made it increasingly easy to study at home for an increasingly standardized test.⁵

Meanwhile, the INS was succeeding at a number of its efficiency-related goals. By 1957, because of over four decades of “emphasis on the processing of naturalization applications,” backlogs had been eliminated in the courts. Courts dealing with naturalization cases, which had once numbered well over 2,000, were trimmed to 781 and 90% of those courts used designated naturalization examiners to conduct hearings (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1957, p. 9). Further, while specific examination questions had yet to be codified, the agency had developed standards of practice for examination.

The Immigration Act of 1965, also known as Hart-Celler for its Congressional sponsors, raised the annual ceiling on immigration, allowed immediate family members of citizens to enter as non-quota immigrants, and eliminated national origins quotas. In signing the bill, President Johnson praised it for keeping with a democratic tradition that “values and rewards each man on the basis of his merit as a man” (Remarks at the signing of the immigration bill, Liberty Island, 1965, p. 1038). However, the Hart-Celler Act, like previous immigration legisla-

tion, avoided addressing citizenship education and examination. Furthermore, although it established family relations and occupation as the two primary factors for determining access to citizenship, it said nothing about the testing of would-be citizens (Ngai, 2004, p. 259).

During this era of change, the naturalization agency continued to do much of the work it had long been engaged in. However, that is not to say there were not opportunities for change. Certificates of completion for immigrants participating in citizenship courses, for instance, presented an opportunity to promote citizenship courses. The authors of *Civic Education for the Foreign-Born in the United States* recommended as early as 1945 that the INS “consider public school certificates attesting to the attendance and progress of petitioners in the citizenship class, in determining their fitness for citizenship” (U.S. Department of Justice, INS & American Association of School Administrators, 1945, pp. 14-15). Courses, however, presented a number of challenges, not the least of which being the difficulty of standardizing them. Instead, leaders at the agency, aware of the shortfalls of their approach, chose to continue working to refine the agency’s standard of knowledge, to tighten the connection between its published materials and its examinations, and to increase processing efficiency.

100 QUESTIONS

By the 1970s, the INS approach to citizenship preparation and testing was well established, both in terms of institutional tradition and autonomous control. Naturalization courts by this time had little say over the examination process, and test-preparation programs taught would-be citizens basic civics and history in keeping with the questions most often asked by examiners. Half a century old, the INS had become a well-established government agency and had carved out a set of distinct roles for itself. Further, although the agency had eliminated most of the influence of the courts in citizenship testing and much of the influence of schools in citizenship preparation, it was not evolving with changing times.

Best practices in test design, for instance, seem to have had no impact on the naturalization agency. In 1974, the Joint Committee of the American Psychological Association, the American Education Research Association, and the National Council of Measurement in Education issued a revised edition of its *Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests*. The 1974 edition was nearly twice as long as its 1966 predecessor, reflecting advancements in validity and including 58 new standards for test users (Joint Committee of APA, AERA, & NCME, 1974). Yet, INS examinations failed to reflect this, remaining unchanged from how they

had looked in previous decades.

The agency's approach also failed to reflect changes in immigration concerns, which were shifting away from Eastern Europe and towards Latin America. Through 1960, 75% of the nation's foreign-born were of European origin, with less than 10% coming from Latin America. By 1970, however, the European share would slip to 62% with the Latin American population doubling to 19%. By 1980, the trend away from European immigration was even starker: Europeans accounted for 39% of foreign-born Americans, Latin Americans 33%, and Asians 19%. There were 2.2 million people born in Mexico living in the United States, as many as from all of the nations of Northern and Western Europe combined. The test, however, did not reflect any of this. Nor did it reflect the fact that half of the nation's 14 million foreign-born reported that they were not citizens (Gibson & Lennon, 1999).

The agency's citizenship education and testing program, meanwhile, not only failed to respond to changing circumstances, but continued to grow narrower in scope and aim. Although the INS indicated that its correspondence course—complete with a textbook, worksheets, and unit tests—was “intended for candidates for naturalization who are unable to attend regularly organized public school classes,” a look at the course reveals the extent to which citizenship education and testing had been standardized by the late 1970s and early 1980s (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1978, p. ii). The introduction to the course stated that immigrants would “be told what to study, what to write, when to take a [practice] test, and what papers...to prepare for correction”—a far cry from what advocates of citizenship courses had promoted earlier in the century (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1978, p. iii).

It was also a far cry from what some citizenship education advocates were calling for during this period. R. Freeman Butts, for instance, supported, among other things, “firsthand practice of skills ranging from learning to speak effectively in an orderly committee meeting to the sophisticated arts of negotiation, compromise, use of power, and decision making” (Butts, 1980, p. 130). Yet, teachers of citizenship courses opened their citizenship textbook *Teacher's Guide* to read that testing would “cover only important facts and concepts,” “require brief answers,” and “include true-false, multiple-choice, matching, fill-in, and completion types” of questions (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1969, p. 6). Further, in some cases, according to a 1984 study, the content of federally provided texts was “between 20 and 40 years old” (Stewart, 1993, p. 121).

Almost all of the questions included in unit tests for the agency's 1978 *Home Study Course* were multiple choice and focused on relatively straightforward facts about United States history and government. Sample ques-

tions included in the test booklet introduction asked: "What country do you live in?" (which asked students to choose from four options: a. The United States of America, b. Mexico, c. Canada, d. Egypt), "Which color is *not* in the United States flag?" (a. Red, b. White, c. Blue, d. Yellow), "What explorer sailed to the American continent in 1492?" and "Who was the third President of the United States?" (U.S. Department of Justice, INS, 1978, p. vii). In short, the questions focused on factual knowledge that could be acquired through rote learning.

In 1986, Congress's Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) created a one-time program that allowed 2.7 million undocumented aliens to adjust their status to become legal residents. The act required that all applicants for legal resident or citizenship status demonstrate an understanding of the fundamentals of American history, the U.S. Constitution, and principles of government. To measure competency, the INS decided to develop an exam consisting of 100 civics questions. According to INS historian Marian Smith, the list was assembled from "typical questions" that were already being asked by immigration officers across the country (Boyte & Kari, 1999).

One might expect that the development of the 100 questions was a highly contentious process. Instead, it was, by all accounts, a non-event—compiled by two INS examiners over a weekend.⁶ The 100 questions were simply a codification of what was already agency practice, the summation of many years of work to make the citizenship process fairer and more expeditious while raising a reasonable barrier to citizenship that did not deny it to the deserving. In creating the master list of items, the naturalization agency succeeded in all of these respects, and did so without raising the ire of interest groups, primarily those representing immigrants, concerned with preventing the adoption of more challenging standards.

Beginning in 1986, petitioners could count on being asked a certain number of questions drawn from a list of 100 and, although each might get different questions, all questions would be pulled from a standardized list, easily memorized if one worked at it. One third of answers to test questions, for instance, were names, dates, or numbers. Further, while some questions did ask would-be citizens to be familiar with the concept of American citizenship—"Name three rights of freedom guaranteed by the Bill of Rights," "Name one benefit of being a citizen of the United States"—it contained seven questions about the American flag ("What are the colors of our flag?" "How many stars are there in our flag?" "What color are the stars on our flag?" "What do the stars on the flag mean?" "How many stripes are there in the flag?" "What color are the stripes?" "What do the stripes on the flag mean?"), three about the Pilgrims ("Why did the Pilgrims come to America?" "Who helped the Pilgrims in

America?” “What is the name of the ship that brought the Pilgrims to America?”), and three to which the answer was George Washington (“Who was the first President of the United States?” “Which President is called the ‘Father of our country’?” “Which President was the first Commander in Chief of the U.S. military?”). The most challenging aspect of the test for many was speaking in English, as immigration examiners occasionally would chat informally with immigrants as a way of sorting out “people who have memorized expected exam questions by rote and have no real working knowledge of English” (Stewart, 1993, p. 119).

It made sense that the INS would handle the task of creating such a standard; it was, after all, the agency responsible for examining petitioners for citizenship. However, Congress, in keeping with its historically hands-off approach, established no system for overseeing the process, instead focusing its attention on efforts to limit illegal immigration (Calavita, 1994). Consequently, the 100 questions reflected the views of a small group of individuals who were charged, not with the task of deliberation or debate, but with the same sort of myopic problem solving the agency had been doing for most of the century.

As a result, the agency created a standard that reflected the concerns of naturalization professionals driven by historical goals like efficiency. As the authors of one study wrote, the agency’s development of the test was “narrowly engineered to meet the needs of the agency, not its clientele [in further] centralizing administration of key aspects of the naturalization process” (DeSipio, Pachon, & Muellmer, 2001, pp. v-vi). The agency’s approach to administering the test was significantly different than it had been at the turn of the century, when naturalization judges varied widely in their approaches to questioning petitioners and courts experienced huge backlogs. Yet, in its emphasis on recalling factual information the test looked like something out of the past. Creative teaching still took place, and immigrants responded positively to programs like family literacy programs. Still, most immigrants were motivated by the aim of obtaining citizenship, which meant first and foremost passing the test (Stewart, 1993, p. 121).

CHANGE AND INERTIA

The citizenship test remained unchanged and unchallenged for over a decade. But, beginning in the late 1990s, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), “the standardization and meaningfulness of the naturalization test [came] under scrutiny” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2006). Although the exam had standardized content,

studies found problems with the test's instruments, protocols, and scoring system. The INS, shortly before being renamed, claimed to have launched a test redesign project in 2000 in response to this body of empirical evidence. Other sources, however, asserted that the review of the exam began in the fall of 2001 after the events of September 11 sparked a new era of concern about immigration (Pesick, 2004). Likely, the two forces worked together in prompting the naturalization agency to commission a reworking of the citizenship test.

When the newly relabeled U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency approached the redesign in late 2001, it contacted the Board on Testing and Assessment of the National Research Council for advice. The Board, in turn, organized the Committee on the U.S. Naturalization Test Redesign to study the project. Members of the Committee were experts in measurement, demography, history, sociology, political science, and English language acquisition. In their report, issued in 2005, the group described problems with the development of the citizenship test, citing in particular a lack of research and the absence of a coherent development plan as problems. Too many decisions, they found, were made by a small number of naturalization agency staff. Those decisions, consequently, were unsystematic, lacked a clearly stated purpose, and did not reflect best practices in test development, measuring test-taking ability more than knowledge of the constituent parts of American citizenship (Elliott, Chudowsky, Plake, McDonnell, 2006; Pesick, 2004).

Perhaps most importantly, the Committee identified what it saw as three inherent tensions in the naturalization test that needed to be addressed: they found tensions between standardization and flexibility in the test, between making the test meaningful and making sure people could pass it, and between the requirement of only basic comprehension of the English language from immigrants and the expectation that those immigrants would be able to clearly demonstrate knowledge of U.S. history and government. Further, they found that the agency, rather than concerning itself with technical and quality concerns, had consistently emphasized practical concerns: timelines, cost, and avoiding public debate (Elliott et al., 2006, p. 24). Change, it appeared, might finally be coming to the naturalization agency and its testing practices.

In March 2005, however, oversight of the citizenship test was shifted to the Office of Citizenship, and USCIS notified the National Research Council that its contract would not be renewed. The process, they claimed, was taking too long and becoming too complex; the agency could do the work itself both quickly and simply. This, despite a report on the test redesign project from the Office of the Inspector General in

the Department of Homeland Security—the umbrella agency overseeing the work of USCIS—that echoed the Committee’s concerns about transparency, accountability, and technical soundness. In response to criticism, USCIS contracted American Institutes for Research (AIR) to collect suggestions for improvement of the test as well as the possible impact of such a move. After leading focus group discussions with USCIS officers, local advocates for immigrants, minority populations, and educators, AIR made its analysis, but did so only according to eight criteria: legal requirements, pass/fail rate, financial costs, impact on case-processing loads, development and implementation timeframe, training requirements, correspondence with technical standards, and test security. The analysis did not address the basic assumptions behind the test. Not surprisingly, the AIR report concluded that actually changing the nature of the test would be more “burdensome” than simply improving candidate preparation and outreach and the administration of the test (Elliott et al., 2006, p. 24). Few took notice of this development.

Although the new version of the test pays more attention to underlying political principles and structures, has a section on geography, and is more chronologically balanced than the 1986 test, about half of questions from the reworked test are rephrased questions from the original. Further, many of the test items—the names of the current president and vice president, the voting age, the origin continent of America’s slaves, the names of the oceans to the east and west of the U.S.—are common knowledge not only to most Americans, but to millions of people around the globe given the power of transnational media and the pervasiveness of American culture.

According to a USCIS press release, the agency aimed to create a “standardized, fair, and meaningful” test. “A meaningful test,” the memo stated, “will encourage civic learning and patriotism among prospective citizens.” However, given the nature of the redesign effort, it is unclear how, if at all, the test will encourage learning any more than the previous version did. Some questions do, as USCIS claimed, focus on concepts, such as the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Yet, the test will still require applicants to correctly answer 6 out of 10 questions chosen from a master list of 100, and USCIS has made available the questions and answers to help applicants prepare. Further, as USCIS freely admits, many of the questions were drawn from the previous version of the test. The primary change seems to be, rather than a new focus on meaningfulness, the creation of “test forms at the same level of difficulty” with “fairer” vocabulary (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, USCIS, 2007).

CONCLUSION

In the early years of citizenship preparation and testing, there was little to no coordination between education programs run by public and private groups and the testing done by judges in immigration courts. This presented significant problems—it was unfair and inefficient and often failed to promote learning—which the naturalization agency rightly sought to address. Leaders believed that establishing a standard and tightening the connection between preparation and testing would ensure the quality of educational programs, as well as encourage immigrants to participate. However, in establishing clear standards of knowledge and a more predictable and systematic way of testing, the agency solved old problems by creating new ones. Today, would-be citizens are tested primarily on their memories, and those who do attend citizenship classes are fairly explicitly taught to the test.

The development of American citizenship education and testing was, without question, the product of constant tradeoffs. Put simply, in creating an ever more simplified standard, the naturalization agency played a critical role in promoting test preparation over education. Agency leaders, aware of what was being lost, did express concern about the creation of a “mere memory test.” Yet, even if it produced troubling side effects, an approach that focused on standardizing coursework, aligning it with a high-stakes test, and centralizing control did meet some of the agency’s major goals. This strategy was simple; it promoted fairness and efficiency and guaranteed minimum competency—issues that the naturalization agency had been charged with addressing. Consequently, leaders at the agency were willing to make some tough compromises.

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, leaders at the naturalization agency no longer fretted over the nature of the citizenship test. The agency’s steady pursuit of efficiency and certainty over depth and variability, once driven by ostensibly pragmatic decision making, eventually created an entrenched status quo. Over time, the agency’s citizenship standard and its testing procedures simply became part of a set of organizational conventions and routines, well accepted by those on the inside. Moreover, although outside activists and educators never failed to voice dissent or promote alternatives, Congress, for its part, took a hands-off approach to overseeing citizenship education and testing.

The naturalization agency has, without question, been quite successful in some of its work in citizenship education and examination. After a century of development, American citizenship education and testing is fair, systematic, and economical. Yet, despite those successes, it is unclear whether we are better off today than we were 100 years ago.

Notes

1. The Bureau of Immigration was established in 1891, but it was not until the passage of the 1906 law that naturalization became a responsibility of the agency, then under the jurisdiction of the Department of Commerce and Labor. In 1909, the Division of Naturalization was made a separate unit, and in 1913, when the agency moved under the jurisdiction of the Department of Labor, it became the Bureau of Naturalization. It would be transferred from the Department of Labor to the Department of Justice in 1940.
2. For more on the influence of textbooks on the curriculum, see Zimmerman (2002).
3. For more on these acts, see Higham (1963, pp. 300-330).
4. For more on the decline of interest in Americanization programs, see Hartmann (1948).
5. For reference to standardization, see U.S. Department of Justice, INS & American Association of School Administrators (1945, p. 8). For references to home-study materials, see U.S. Department of Justice, INS (1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957). For references to questions, see Immigration and Naturalization Bureau (1955).
6. This is according to Marian Smith, as well as from personal communication with historian of education Jeff Mirel of the University of Michigan.

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